

Lavon Affair



Pinhas Lavon

The **Lavon Affair** refers to a failed Israeli covert operation, code named **Operation Susannah**, conducted in Egypt in the Summer of 1954. As part of the false flag operation,^[1] a group of Egyptian Jews were recruited by Israeli military intelligence to plant bombs inside Egyptian, American and British-owned civilian targets, cinemas, libraries and American educational centers. The bombs were timed to detonate several hours after closing time. The attacks were to be blamed on the Muslim Brotherhood, Egyptian Communists, “unspecified malcontents” or “local nationalists” with the aim of creating a climate of sufficient violence and instability to induce the British government to retain its occupying troops in Egypt’s Suez Canal zone.^[2] The operation caused no casualties, except for operative Philip Natanson, when a bomb he was taking to place in a movie theater ignited prematurely in his pocket; for two members of the cell who committed suicide after being captured; and for two operatives who were tried, convicted and executed by Egypt.

The operation ultimately became known as the **Lavon Affair** after the Israeli defense minister Pinhas Lavon

was forced to resign as a consequence of the incident. Before Lavon’s resignation, the incident had been euphemistically referred to in Israel as the “**Unfortunate Affair**” or “**The Bad Business**” (Hebrew: העסק הביש, *HaEsek HaBish*). After Israel publicly denied any involvement in the incident for 51 years, the surviving agents were officially honored in 2005 by being awarded certificates of appreciation by Israeli President Moshe Katzav.^[3]

1 Operation Susannah

1.1 Aim

In the early 1950s, the United States initiated a more activist policy of support for Egyptian nationalism; this was often in contrast with British policies of maintaining its regional hegemony. Israel feared that this policy, which encouraged Britain to withdraw its military forces from the Suez Canal, would embolden Egyptian President Nasser’s military ambitions towards Israel. Israel first sought to influence this policy through diplomatic means but was frustrated.^[4]

In the summer of 1954 Colonel Binyamin Gibli, the chief of Israel’s military intelligence, Aman, initiated *Operation Susannah* in order to reverse that decision. The goal of the Operation was to carry out bombings and other acts of sabotage in Egypt with the aim of creating an atmosphere in which the British and American opponents of British withdrawal from Egypt would be able to gain the upper hand and block the British withdrawal from Egypt.

According to historian Shabtai Teveth, who wrote one of the more detailed accounts, the assignment was “To undermine Western confidence in the existing [Egyptian] regime by generating public insecurity and actions to bring about arrests, demonstrations, and acts of revenge, while totally concealing the Israeli factor. The team was accordingly urged to avoid detection, so that suspicion would fall on the Muslim Brotherhood, the Communists, ‘unspecified malcontents’ or ‘local nationalists’.”^[2]

1.2 The secret cell

The top-secret cell, Unit 131,^[5] which was to carry out the operation, had existed since 1948 and under Aman since 1950. At the time of Operation Susannah, Unit 131 was the subject of a bitter dispute between Aman

(military intelligence) and Mossad (national intelligence agency) over who should control it.

Unit 131 operatives had been recruited several years before, when the Israeli intelligence officer Avram Dar arrived in Cairo under the cover of a British citizen from Gibraltar named John Darling. He had recruited several Egyptian Jews who had previously been active in illegal emigration activities and trained them for covert operations.

1.3 Operation commenced

Aman decided to activate the network in the Spring of 1954. On 2 July the cell detonated bombs at a post office in Alexandria,^[6] and on 14 July, it bombed the libraries of the U.S. Information Agency in Alexandria and Cairo and a British-owned theater. The homemade bombs, consisting of bags containing acid placed over nitroglycerine, were inserted into books, and placed on the shelves of the libraries just before closing time. Several hours later, as the acid ate through the bags, the bombs would explode. They did little damage to the targets and caused no injuries or deaths.



Meir Max Bineth

Before the group began the operation, Israeli agent Avri Elad (Avraham Zeidenberg) was sent to oversee the operations. Elad assumed the identity of Paul Frank, a former SS officer with Nazi underground connections. Avri Elad allegedly informed the Egyptians, resulting in the Egyptian Intelligence Service following a suspect to his

target, the Rio Theatre, where a fire engine was standing by. Egyptian authorities arrested this suspect, Philip Natanson, when his bomb accidentally ignited prematurely in his pocket. Having searched his apartment, they found incriminating evidence and names of accomplices to the operation.

Several suspects were arrested, including Egyptian Jews and undercover Israelis. Colonel Dar and Elad had managed to escape. Two suspects, Yosef Carmon and Hungarian-born Israeli Meir Max Bineth committed suicide in prison.

2 Trials and jail

The Egyptian trial began on 11 December and lasted until 27 January 1955; two of the accused (Moshe Marzouk and Shmuel Azar) were condemned to execution by hanging, two were acquitted, and the rest received lengthy prison terms.

The trial was criticised in Israel as a show trial, although strict Israeli military censorship of the press, at the time, meant that the Israeli public was kept in the dark about the facts of the case and, in fact, were led to believe that the defendants were innocent.^[7] There were allegations that evidence had been extracted by torture.^[8]

After serving seven-year jail sentences, two of the imprisoned operatives (Meir Meyuhas and Meir Za'afra) were released in 1962. The rest were eventually freed in February 1968, in a secret addendum to a prisoner of war exchange.

Soon after the affair, Mossad chief Isser Harel expressed suspicion to Aman concerning the integrity of Avri Elad. Despite his concerns, Aman continued using Elad for intelligence operations until 1956, when he was caught trying to sell Israeli documents to the Egyptians. Elad was tried in Israel and sentenced to 10 years imprisonment. During Elad's imprisonment in Ayalon Prison, the media were only able to refer to him as the "The Third Man" or "X" due to government censorship.^[9] In 1976, while living in Los Angeles, Elad publicly identified himself as the "Third Man" from the Lavon Affair.^[9] In 1980, Harel publicly revealed evidence that Elad had been turned by the Egyptians even before Operation Susannah.

3 Political aftermath

3.1 Denial and first inquiry

In meetings with prime minister Moshe Sharett, minister of defense Pinhas Lavon denied any knowledge of the operation. When intelligence chief Gibli contradicted Lavon, Sharett commissioned a board of inquiry consisting of Israeli Supreme Court Justice Isaac Olshan and the

first chief of staff of the Israel Defense Forces, Yaakov Dori that was unable to find conclusive evidence that Lavon had authorized the operation. Lavon tried to fix the blame on Shimon Peres, who was the secretary general of the defense ministry, and Gibli for insubordination and criminal negligence.

Sharett resolved the dilemma by siding with Peres (who had, along with Moshe Dayan, testified against Lavon), after which Lavon resigned on 17 February 1955. Former prime minister David Ben-Gurion succeeded Lavon as minister of defense. On 3 November 1955, Sharett (who had not known about the operation in advance, and had therefore strongly denied Israel's involvement) resigned as Prime Minister and was replaced by Ben-Gurion.

3.2 Subsequent revelations and inquiries

In April 1960, a review of minutes from the inquiry found inconsistencies and possibly a fraudulent document in Gibli's original testimony that seemed to support Lavon's account of events. During this time, it came to light that Elad (the Israeli agent running Operation Susannah in Egypt) had committed perjury during the original inquiry. Elad was also suspected of betraying the group to Egyptian authorities, though the charges were never proven. He was eventually sentenced to a jail term of 10 years for trying to sell Israeli documents to the Egyptians in an unrelated matter. Ben-Gurion scheduled closed hearings with a new board of inquiry chaired by Haim Cohn, a supreme court justice.

This inquiry found that the perjury indeed had been committed, and that Lavon had not authorized the operation. Sharett and Levi Eshkol tried to issue a statement that would placate both Lavon and those who had opposed him. Ben-Gurion refused to accept the compromise and viewed it as a divisive play within the Mapai party.

Another investigative committee took up the matter and sided with the Cohn inquiry. Ben-Gurion then resigned from his post as defense minister. This led to the expulsion of Lavon from the Histadrut labor union and an early call for new elections, the results of which changed the political structure in Israel. The specifics of Operation Susannah were kept secret from the Israeli public at the time of the political upheaval.

3.3 Public debate

Due to Israel's strict Military Censorship the details of the affair could not be openly discussed in the media. Despite this, debate did occur but with the use of code words such as the "Senior Officer", to refer to Gibli, and the "unfortunate business" to refer to the Egyptian operation.^[10]

4 Legacy

Operation Susannah and the Lavon Affair turned out to be disastrous for Israel in several ways:

- Israel lost significant standing and credibility in its relations with the United Kingdom and the United States that took years to repair.^[11]
- The political aftermath caused considerable political turmoil in Israel that affected the influence of its government.^[12]

In March 2005, Israel publicly honored the surviving operatives, and President Moshe Katsav presented each with a certificate of appreciation for their efforts on behalf of the state, ending decades of official denial by Israel.^[3]

5 References

- [1] James M. Lutz; Brenda J. Lutz (2004). *Global terrorism*. p. 46. ISBN 0-415-70051-5. Retrieved 7 June 2011.
- [2] S. Teveth (1996). *Ben-Gurion's spy: the story of the political scandal that shaped modern Israel*. Columbia University Press. p. 81. ISBN 978-0-231-10464-7.
- [3] "Israel honors 9 Egyptian spies". Ynetnews. Reuters. 30 March 2005.
- [4] Hahn, Peter L (2004). *United States, Great Britain, and Egypt, 1945-1956: Strategy and Diplomacy*. UNC Press. p. 187. ISBN 978-0-8078-1942-5. In late 1954, the Anglo-Egyptian base agreement and American plans to promote a Northern tier security arrangement generated tension between Israel and Egypt. Israeli officials feared that British troop withdrawal from the Canal zone ... would encourage Egyptian aggressiveness toward Israel and remove Western leverage to modify Egyptian behavior on issues such as Suez Canal restrictions
- [5] Lappin, Yaakov (2008-08-20). "Binyamin Gibli, Lavon Affair figure, dies at 89". *The Jerusalem Post*. Retrieved 25 May 2012.
- [6] Black, Ian; Morris, Benny (1 June 1992). *Israel's secret wars: a history of Israel's intelligence services*. Grove Press. p. 111. ISBN 978-0-8021-3286-4. Retrieved 19 June 2011.
- [7] Shlaim, Avi (2000). *The Iron Wall*. Penguin Books. pp. 117–119. ISBN 978-0-14-028870-4. Sharett knew that a death sentence would have a disastrous effect at home because the Israeli public had been led to believe that the defendants were innocent.
- [8] "The Lavon Affair". *Jewish Virtual Library*. Retrieved 2008-10-29.
- [9] Herman, Pini. "Los Angeles had its own Israeli Ex-"Prisoner X"". *Los Angeles Jewish Journal*. Tribe Publications. Retrieved 20 February 2013.

- [10] e.g. Teveth, Shabtai (1974). *Moshe Dayan: The soldier, the man, the legend*. Quartet Books. pp. 265, 266. ISBN 0-7043-1080-5. Still used twenty years later.
- [11] *The encyclopedia of the Arab-Israeli conflict: a political, social, and military history*. ABC-CLIO. 2008. p. 610.
- [12] Beinín, Joel (2005). *The dispersion of Egyptian Jewry: culture, politics, and the formation of a modern diaspora*. AUC Press. p. 111.

6 Further reading

- Aviezer Golan, Ninio Marcelle, Victor Levy, Robert Dassa and Philip Natanson (As told to Aviezer Golan) (Translated from Hebrew by Peretz Kidron) (Fwd by Golda Meir): *Operation Susannah*, Harper & Row, NYC, 1978 ISBN 978-0-06-011555-5
- Joel Beinín: Nazis and Spies The Discourse of Operation Susannah, ch 4 in *The Dispersion Of Egyptian Jewry Culture, Politics, And The Formation Of A Modern Diaspora* Berkeley: University of California Press, c1998. Amer Univ in Cairo Pr, 2005, ISBN 978-977-424-890-0
- Joel Beinín: Egyptian Jewish Identities. Communitarianisms, nationalisms, nostalgias Stanford Humanities Review, 1996
- Ostrovsky, Victor; Hoy, Claire (1991). *By way of deception*. St. Martin's Press. ISBN 978-0-312-92614-4.

7 External links

- The Lavon Affair - Israel and Terror in Egypt
- *The Lavon Affair* by Doron Geller, JUICE, The Jewish Agency for Israel, Education Department
- The Lavon Affair by David Hirst, Excerpts from his book: *The Gun and the Olive Branch*, 1977, 1984, Futura Publications
- The Lavon Affair including quotes from Moshe Sharett's Diary
- List of books about the Lavon Affair dead link

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